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ABSTRACT

Using sophistic theory and focusing on intersections in the practice and reception of sophistry and advertising, a study analyzed a contemporary advertising campaign. A number of extrinsic similarities between sophistic and advertising rhetoric exist: their commercial basis, their popular reception as dishonest speech, and the reception of both as nonetheless entertaining. Besides surface parallels, there are also intrinsic correlations. The techniques of antithesis, parataxis, and probability employed by the Sophists reappear in late 20th century advertising. The current campaign for the Saturn automobile allows for rhetorical analysis. The common theme of the Saturn print campaign (as seen in three representative ads) could be stated as: "real" people are the people who buy Saturns, because "real" people also recommend them. The ads all feature ordinary people who are much more in evidence than the product itself. Contemporary advertising employs a rhetoric not of fixed, monologic, hypotactic certainty, but one of fluid, antithetical, paratactic reasoning--that of sophistry. Although it may be a stretch to conclude that the persuasive techniques championed by a small group of orators in the fifth century B.C. directly inform the rhetoric of advertising, a web of connections links the two. With the proliferation of advertising and with its power to motivate and persuade, access to every analytical tool is needed. This use of the Sophists can serve as an effective instructional exercise, both in the advertising course and in the rhetoric course. (Includes illustrations of the Saturn advertisements. Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

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Thursday, March 17, 1994

Session D.8 *Sophistic Rhetoric: From Philosophy to the Market Place*
Speaker 3: *Matt Matcuk*
Presentation Title:

"Gorgias on Madison Avenue:
Sophistry and the Rhetoric of Advertising"

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Presentation Outline:

Introduction and overview

I. On the Surface-- coincidences and similarities between sophistic rhetoric and advertising rhetoric

II. Antithesis, Parataxis, and Probability-- a discussion of three sophistic *téchné*, including illustrative examples from the writings of Protagoras, Gorgias, and Antiphon.

III. Sophisticated Advertising-- A sophistic analysis of the Saturn ad campaign
1. Brief description of Figures: A. Robin Millage, B. Cheryl Silas, and C. Barry and Cynthia Nelson (please see attached photocopies).
2. Antithesis
3. Parataxis
4. Argument through probability

Conclusions

Thanks for attending this session. If you're interested in what's been discussed today and would like to get in touch to talk more about the rhetoric of advertising or related issues, please feel free to contact me either at my home address or through the university.

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Gorgias on Madison Avenue:

Sophistry and the Rhetoric of Advertising

(Given on 3/17/94 as part of a panel presentation at C.C.C.C.)

When former advertising executive David Ogilvy named his 1963 autobiography *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, it topped the bestseller lists. For as Ogilvy knew, advertising has a distinctly lurid appeal. Drawn to it as to the tabloids at the checkout counter, we say we're not taken in for a second, yet we cannot resist lingering, theorizing, if only for a moment.

But an exploration of the rhetoric of advertising represents more than academic slumming, and more than a formal exercise. Advertising holds the potential for exerting a tremendous influence. Corporate spending on advertising in the U.S. topped $130 billion in 1992 (Baldwin 55). According to essayist Pico Iyer, "by age 40 we've seen one million ads" (Baldwin 55). In short, we have a pressing need to sort out this widespread and influential form of rhetoric.

This essay explores similarities between advertising and the rhetoric of the sophists. Section one discusses similarities in the reception of the two rhetorics, as well as corresponding features on their surfaces. Section two describes three important sophistic techne, as illustrated in the writings of some of their better-known practitioners. The final section analyzes a contemporary advertising campaign in light of sophistic theory.

I. On the Surface

Active mainly during the 5th century B.C., the sophists were the first systematic teachers of persuasion and produced what Isocrates called "the so-called arts of oratory" (175). Isocrates did not stand alone in wanting to distance himself from the sophists. Plato nearly made a career out of discrediting them in dialogues such as his *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*.

This section focuses on intersections in the practice and reception of sophistry and advertising, the most obvious of which involves money. G.B. Kerferd maintains that the first element of the sophists' professionalism "is the fact that they received fees" (25). The charging of fees for teaching the art of persuasion first set the sophists apart from their predecessors and sparked the notoriety which plagues them to this day.

The two rhetorics have also been similarly received: we

generally mistrust both of them. The ancient Greeks called the sophists "clever pleaders" who, according to Aristotle,"[dwell] upon irrelevant matters, for their rules have to do, simply and solely with the production of a certain mental attitude in the judge" (Rhetoric 3). Today, the goal of advertising could hardly be put more succinctly: to arouse "a certain mental attitude," in the audience.

But neither clever pleading nor clever advertising are universally hated. In fact, both are frequently enjoyed by a mass audience, and this stands as a third similarity. As much as Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates might vilify sophistry, its practice in the Athenian law courts served as public entertainment. Many of the sophists capitalized upon this popularity by adopting a poetic, crowd-pleasing style which found its apotheosis in the rhetoric of Gorgias of Leontini (480-375 B.C.). On Gorgias's lips, according to George Kennedy, "oratory became a tintinnabulation of rhyming words and echoing rhythms"-- a phrase also applicable to the advertising jingle (29). In fact, K. J. Maidment footnotes his translation of Antiphon's *Tetralogies* (discussed below) by saying that "the Greek is a deliberate jingle, which cannot be rendered convincingly in English" (67).

Advertising boasts a similar entertainment value. Often aided through the use of humor, advertising theme lines, tag lines, and punch lines get picked up and endlessly repeated. Although few would argue that "Where's the beef?," "Uh-huh," or "Just do it" are rhetorical gems, slogans such as these have a way of temporarily (if we are lucky) permeating the public consciousness. In short, advertising appears to be loved and hated in much the same way which the sophists appear to have been both admired and shunned.

So we find a number of extrinsic similarities between sophistic and advertising rhetoric: their commercial basis, their popular reception as dishonest speech, and the reception of both as nonetheless entertaining. With so many parallels on the surface, can we find intrinsic correlations as well?

II. Antithesis, Parataxis, and Probability.

The second sophistic technique of interest is antithesis, described by Susan Jarratt as "playfully pairing opposite words" (21). Antithesis found perhaps its highest form in the writings of Gorgias, whose *Encomium of Helen* demonstrates how the pairing of opposing terms yields multiple interpretability:

> Born from such stock, she had godlike beauty, which taking and not mistaking, she kept. In many did she work much desire for her love, and her one body was the cause of bringing together many bodies of men thinking great thoughts for great goals... And all came because of a passion which loved to conquer and a love of honor which was unconquered... (Kennedy 29).

Here, rhetorical antithesis allows for a temporary suspension of meaning, a gap, which the listener must step into to complete or fill.

Richard Lanham defines the second term, parataxis, as follows:

> Clauses or phrases arranged independently (a coordinate, rather than a subordinate, construction), sometimes... without the customary connectives... Opposite of **Hypotaxis** (71).

The sophists' frequent employment of parataxis operates, however, on more than a purely syntactical level. When we place rhetorical elements side by side without connectives, the listener must fill in the gaps to construct for him- or herself probable relationships and connections. Jarratt describes how parataxis--especially when used in conjunction with antithesis--"creat[es] narratives distinguished by multiple or open causality, the indeterminacies of which are then resolved through the self-conscious use of probable arguments" (Re-Reading 12).

We find parataxis at work in the following fragment from Protagoras, where the rhetor constructs a series of gaps in which the reader or listener must construct meaning; in this case the value of eloquence:

> Toil and work and instruction and education and wisdom are the garland of fame which is woven from the flowers of an eloquent tongue and set on the head of those who love it. Eloquence however is difficult, yet its flowers

> are rich and ever new, and the audience and those who applaud and the teachers rejoice, and the scholars make progress and the fools are vexed--or perhaps they are not even vexed, because they have not sufficient insight (Freeman 127).

By arranging clauses in side-by-side tension, Protagoras sketches out the complicated nature of rhetoric, allowing listeners to arrive at their own conclusions (albeit ones heavily influenced by the speaker) as to its value.

A third distinguishing element of sophistic rhetoric is its use of argument based on probability, a technique evident in Antiphon's *Tetralogies*, a series of four-part legal dialogues. In the first *Tetralogy*, an *Anonymous Prosecution for Murder*, Antiphon explicitly states the importance of probability: "With [the above] facts in mind, you must place implicit confidence in any and every indication from probability presented to you" (53). The opening prosecution then proceeds by noting that "malefactors are not likely" to have murdered the victim in order to rob him, and that it would be improbable that the death resulted from a quarrel, occurring, as it did, in a remote location, late at night (53). The prosecutor concludes by again underscoring his technique, arguing that "[i]nferences from probability and eyewitnesses have alike proved the defendant's guilt" (57).

When the defense replies, he too calls to his aid the notion of probability, using the technique to undo the prosecutor's statements:

> It is not, as the prosecution maintain, unlikely that a man wandering about at the dead of night should be murdered for his clothing; nothing is more likely.

Throughout the tetralogies, the speakers emphasize the importance of argument through probability.

To summarize then, antithesis, parataxis, and argument through probability form three of the techniques employed most characteristically by the sophists. Let us see how these techne reappear in the rhetoric of late twentieth-century advertising.

III. Sophisticated Advertising

To narrow the scope of this essay I have selected one type of product-- automobiles, and one medium-- full page, four-color magazine advertisements, and I have concentrated on one company's current campaign, that of the Saturn Corporation. What follows is a brief explication of the three ads (see figures A, B, and C). A sophistic rhetorical analysis follows.

Figure A. asserts that, "If ROBIN MILLAGE paid much attention to conventional wisdom, she wouldn't be standing where she is today." Yet the sentence reads ambiguously, for "where she is today" denotes Robin's geographic location (the remote village in Alaska where she makes her home), while it connotes her position in life (as a rugged individualist who chose this unique lifestyle.)

Figure B. claims that, "CHERYL SILAS had a highway collision, was hit twice from behind, and then sold three cars for us." The double meaning lies in the phrase "sold three cars for us." Did she climb out of the wreck and start demonstrating the car's safety features to passersby who were shopping for new cars? When we read the copy, we get the joke: Cheryl only "sold" the cars by referral (two policemen and Cheryl's brother later bought Saturns-- we assume because they perceived them to be safe after seeing Cheryl come out of hers unscathed). So Cheryl did not "sell" any cars at all. Or did she? Ultimately, the joke is on us, for Cheryl really *is* selling cars for Saturn-- and a lot more than three of them, considering the potential audience for the advertisement which she has been paid to appear in.

Figure C. reads "Fifteen dealerships into their search for a new car, BARRY AND CYNTHIA NELSON felt like throwing in the towel." The punning strikes us as obvious. The Nelsons are washing their new Saturn-- water, suds, towel, get it? The body copy nudgingly tells us that they were "ready to just wash their hands of the whole idea of buying a new car." Yet the phrase must ironic, because although they may indeed be about to towel off their new Saturn, throw in the towel, and go for a ride, they must not have "thrown in the towel" (that is, given up) on trying to buy a new

car--because they have succeeded, as the photograph "proves" to us.

A Sophistic Analysis

At first, the most striking feature of these ads seems unrelated to sophistic rhetorical techne. For the common theme of the Saturn campaign could be stated like this: Real people, just like you, are the people who buy Saturns, because real people, just like you, recommend them. Yet sophistic techniques are in fact used to establish this unifying premise.

Antithesis is used, first, as an attention-getting device, in which the ads' headlines contradict the accompanying illustrations. "If ROBIN MILLAGE paid much attention to conventional wisdom, she wouldn't be standing where she is today," the first ad reads, leading us to believe that she truly is someplace special. But where is she really? The photograph places her in the middle of nowhere (albeit a rustic, mountain-fresh nowhere, since this is, after all, advertising.) "CHERYL SILAS had a highway collision, was hit twice from behind, and then sold three cars for us." But Cheryl doesn't look like a car salesperson at all. And why, after such a terrible crash, does her car look so beautiful? And what about the Nelsons? "BARRY AND CYNTHIA... felt like throwing in the towel." But there they are, not dejected or defeated at all, but grinning, in fact, from ear to ear. What is going on? Why do the words and pictures oppose each other?

Critics have charged that such antitheses have been engineered merely as attention-getting devices. Jarratt describes this criticism as one traditionally levelled at the sophists, in which "the antithetical pairings... [are] seen as a manipulative device for eliciting emotional effects in oratorical performance" (Historiography 18). Yet she explains that the technique also achieves more complex rhetorical goals. Citing Untersteiner, she posits that antithesis might be responsible for "awaken[ing] in [the audience] an awareness of the multiplicity of possible truths" (18). As noted below, this multiplicity of truths will be a necessary precondition to argument through probability.

An additional antithesis, however, functions within the Saturn campaign. Not only do the headlines contradict the pictures which they describe, but the pictures contradict one of the supposed goals of any car advertisement. All three of the ads featured here, as well as subsequent ads in the Saturn campaign, feature the people more prominently than the product. I would suggest that what the ads really sell is, therefore, not the car but the people; Robin, Barry and Cynthia, and Cheryl. And us.

To state that "We are being sold," does not mean that "We are being sold (a car)," but that an image of ourselves is being sold in the advertisements. Saturn Corporation--or at least Hal Riney & Partners, the company's ad agency--sell us their product by convincing us that we, like the people in the ads whom they hope we will identify with, are Saturn kind of people. The corporate themeline plays upon the importance of people: "A different kind of company. A different kind of car." The word company could be taken in either its corporate sense, or in its everyday sense, as in "the company you keep."

The sophistic techne of parataxis figures largely in these ads as well. Recall that we defined parataxis as phrases arranged independently, in a coordinating, rather than subordinating, construction. In the following, note how the key selling points are implied, lying in the gaps and relationships between the ideas.

"Then Cynthia's mother suggested us," reads the first line of figure C. From the above discussion, it shouldn't surprise us that the first words in the copy come from another "real person." Who do we trust more than our mothers? Note too, in accordance with the theme line, that Cynthia's mother does not suggest buying a Saturn; the copy says that she "suggested us," meaning the Saturn Company.

Yet when Barry and Cynthia "drop into" the Saturn showroom, they end up being taken by surprise. How?

> How? Well, it's pretty simple--from one end of Saturn to the other, it all comes down to this: we're different. (In fact, there's a ton of research about how we're changing the automobile business... But since other car companies are always quoting this report or

> that one, we'll just quote Barry.)
>
> "I've never been a joiner, I'm not in any clubs or anything. But this--you know, I wave at every saturn that goes by, and they wave right back. It feels like we're related or something. And the weird thing is-- all I did was buy a car."

No subordinating movement leads us from one paragraph to the next: the copy never explains why the showroom experience surprised the customers. Instead, we're simply told that Saturn is "different." Here too, we can note the conflation of the car, the company and the people who drive the car in the phrase, "From one end of Saturn to the other, it all comes down to this: we're different."

Finally, when we arrive at Barry's quote, we find a parataxis that borders on chaos. If sophistic rhetors were criticized for forfeiting meaning in the interest of enigmatic arrangement and pleasing sound, then Barry upholds perhaps the worst of sophistic traditions. He begins with a statement with no logical connection to anything stated so far: "I've never been a joiner..." Nor is this a lead-in to a related consumer benefit. His opening might make sense if it preceded a line such as, "But the Saturn people really must have had me in mind when they designed this car." But Barry's quote does neither, for his next statement indicates that he waves to other Saturn drivers. The reader must infer that although Barry never really "belonged" before, now he does belong--to the Saturn family. If the familial metaphor is still not clear enough, Barry's quote has been edited to conclude--paratactically and antithetically--by suggesting the familial connection while simultaneously implying its impossibility: "It feels like we're related or something. And the weird thing is-- all I did was buy a car."

Judith Williamson notes that contemporary advertising, because it is widely recognized as false and manipulative, has had to deemphasize overt claims in favor of ones which work on the level of the signifier. Here she means the signifier to be an object or image which stands for, or signifies, some desirable trait or quality:

> ...the major corollary of the fact that advertising's social image is one of dishonesty, is that advertisements must function *not* at the overt level of 'what is said' ('Persil washes whiter' etc.)--because this is not believed--they function on the level of the signifier... [this] makes it necessary for the selling to be located in the mythology of the signifier, directing attention to other myth systems, and away from the system of the ad (175).

I would argue that in turning away from what Williamson calls the overt system of argumentation, advertising moves away from an Aristotelian proof through hypotactic reasoning. What it turns to in its place, is sophistry. Contemporary advertising employs a rhetoric not of fixed, monologic, hypotactic certainty, but one of fluid, antithetical, paratactic probability.

We see such a rhetorical system at work, especially the use of argument through probability, in figure A.:

> Petersburg, Alaska, is a tiny fishing village on an island off the coast of northern British Columbia. And for Robin Millage, it was nothing more than a vacation destination, until she saw it and decided to stay. You see, Robin's a bit of an adventurer.
>
> Which may be why she recently bought a brand new Saturn, sight unseen, from a retailer in Spokane, Washington, and had it shipped 2500 miles to the village.

After the opening paragraph, which establishes Robin as a person who knows her own mind and is unafraid to take a risk, we move to the next paragraph not with a causal conjunction such as "therefore" or "so", but with a remarkably hesitant "may be." Her adventurousness "may be" the reason that she chose a Saturn.

> But Robin wanted a car she could trust. A car that was easy to service. Plus, a car that wasn't going to leave her alone in the woods. And everything she read pointed to a Saturn.

No claims are made. Robin wanted a dependable car, one that was easy to service. And Robin is not merely impetuous; she does her homework. We can only guess at "everything she read."

The ad concludes:

> Of course, Robin's an exception. And we realize that everybody isn't going to just pick up and move to some pristine island in Alaska and buy a Saturn.

So why do you suppose there are two on the island now?

This is argument through probability. Is it likely, the copy hints, that someone else on this very same remote island would buy a Saturn too, if they weren't dependable, high-quality cars? In an era of increasing consumer skepticism, the sophisticated advertiser knows that the strongest way to get the message across is to choose what appears to be the weakest argumentative method--that of "merely suggesting" the truth of the client's claims.

To conclude from this discussion that the persuasive techniques championed by a small group of orators in the fifth century B.C. directly inform the rhetoric of advertising may be a stretch. Yet a web of connections links the two.

Although our rhetoric has evolved with our society, as theorists such as Walter Ong have noted, we still may be able to benefit from applying the techne of the past to today's rhetorical situations. With the proliferation of advertising that surrounds us, and with advertising's power to motivate and persuade, we need access to every available analytical tool. The most useful of those tools might, in fact, be found in the rhetoric of those accused of manipulation two-and-a-half millennia before Madison Avenue existed. The sophists may, after all, still have something to teach us.

This use of Gorgias can serve as an effective instructional exercise, both in the advertising course and in the rhetoric course.

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If ROBIN MILLAGE paid much attention to conventional wisdom, she wouldn't be standing where she is today.

Petersburg, Alaska, is a tiny fishing village on an island off the coast of northern British Columbia. And for Robin Millage, it was nothing more than a vacation destination, until she saw it and decided to stay. You see, Robin's a bit of an adventurer.

Which may be why she recently bought a brand new Saturn, sight unseen, from a retailer in Spokane, Washington, and had it shipped 2500 miles to the village.

©1991 Saturn Corporation. Robin Millage is a registered trademark of GM Saturn SLI

According to our records, not a lot of people do that.

But Robin wanted a car she could trust. A car that was easy to service. Plus, a car that wasn't going to leave her alone in the woods. And everything she read pointed to a Saturn.

Of course, Robin's an exception. And we realize that everybody isn't going to just pick up and move to some pristine island in Alaska and buy a Saturn.

So why do you suppose there are two on the island now?

SATURN

A DIFFERENT KIND OF COMPANY. A DIFFERENT KIND OF CAR.

If you'd like to know more about Saturn, and our new sedans and coupe, please call us at 1-800-522-5000.

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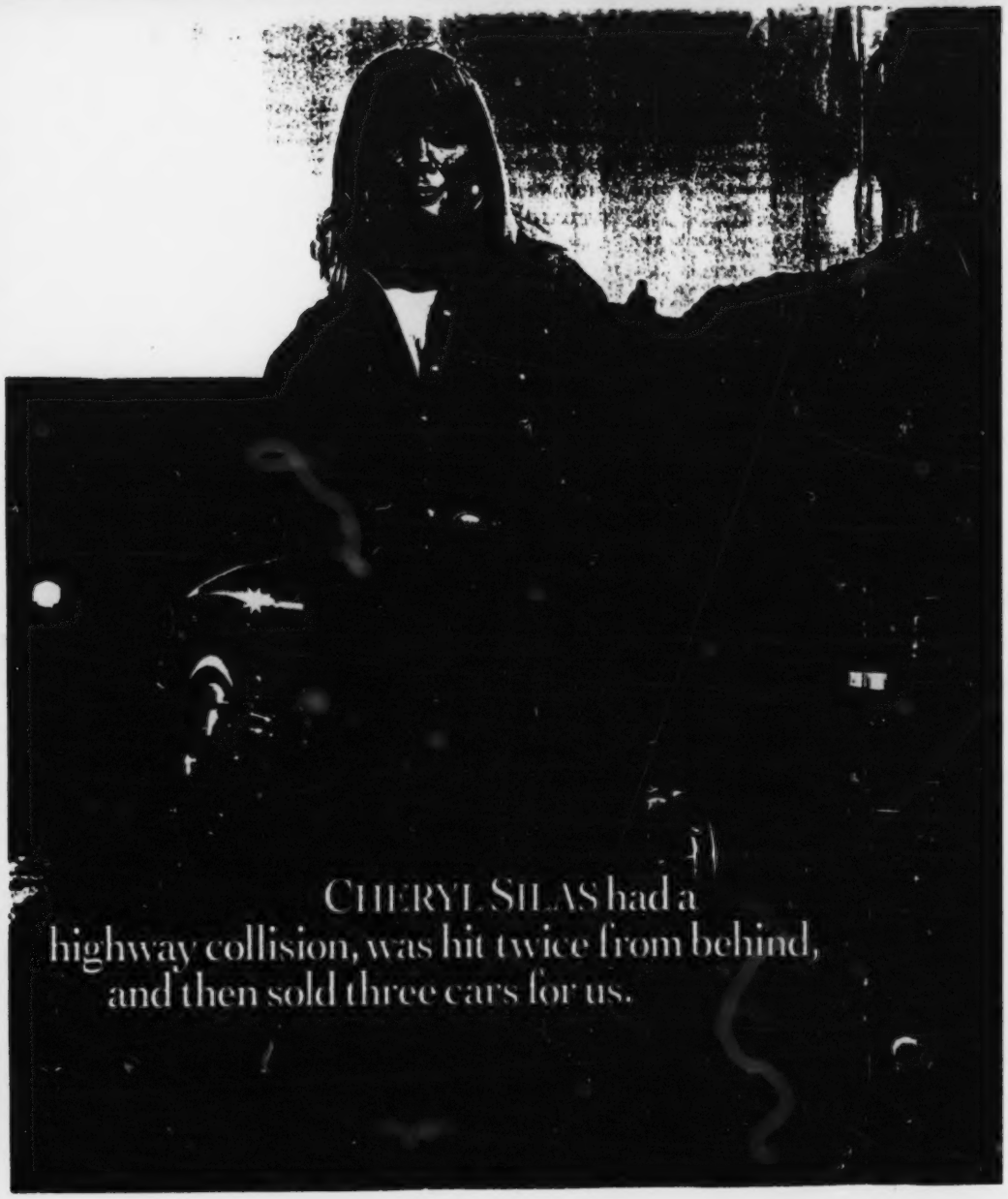

A policeman at the accident, Officer Jimmie Boylan, thought, "She's lucky to be alive." Cheryl had just stepped out of her totalled Saturn coupe. Upon impact, her shoulder harness and lap belt held her tight as the spaceframe of her car absorbed most of the collision. He watched as Cheryl's sport coupe and the other cars were towed away.

The following week, Cheryl made the return trip to Saturn of Albuquerque and ordered another SC, just like her first. And then we started noticing some rather unconventional "referrals."

A few days later, Officer Boylan came into the showroom and ordered a grey sedan for himself. Then a buddy of his, also a policeman, did the same. And shortly thereafter, Cheryl's brother, more than a little happy that he still had a sister, and needing a new car himself, bought yet another Saturn in Illinois.

But the topper came when a very nice young woman walked into the showroom to test drive a sedan. She said she just wanted to know a little more about what our cars were like. Not that she was going to buy one right away, or anything. She'd just never seen a Saturn up close until she'd rear-ended one out on the highway several weeks earlier.

SATURN

A DIFFERENT KIND *of* COMPANY. A DIFFERENT KIND *of* CAR.

If you'd like to know more about Saturn, and our new sedans and coupe, please call us at 1-800-522-5000.

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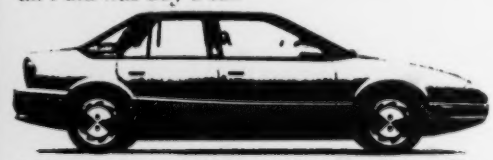
Then Cynthia's mother suggested us. She'd heard we were a brand new company, and that our cars cost about the same as all the imports they'd been looking at.

So Barry and Cynthia dropped into a Saturn showroom, prepared to do battle with the sales staff and ready to just wash their hands of the whole idea of buying a new car. But the showroom staff took the Nelsons completely by surprise, as they have just about all of our customers.

How? Well, it's pretty simple—from one end of Saturn to the other, it all comes down to this: we're different. (In fact, there's a ton of research about how we're changing the automobile business. Especially the way we take care of our customers. But since other car companies are always quoting this report or that one, we'll just quote Barry.)

"I've never been a joiner, I'm not in any clubs or anything. But this—you know, I wave at every Saturn that goes by, and they wave right back. It feels like we're related or something. And the weird thing is—all I did was buy a car."

SATURN.



A DIFFERENT KIND of COMPANY. A DIFFERENT KIND of CAR.

If you'd like to know more about Saturn, and our new sedans and coupe, please call us at 1-800-522-5000.

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